3

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-2

WASHINGTON POST
14 May 1984

Hang the Polls, Conviction Is What Counts on Latin Policy

Lou Cannon

REAGAN & CO.

President Reagan's nationally televised pledge to stand up to "communist aggression and subversion" in Central America was more than a successful appeal to mobilize public opinion on behalf of key congressional votes.

Beyond the immediate tactical objective, the president's speech was the opening salvo in a fall campaign more likely to deal with foreign policy than his political strategists would prefer. Reagan's inclinations have combined with the pressure of events to make U.S. policy in Central America a major campaign issue.

On the surface, this does not bode well for the president. Public opinion surveys, including those taken for the White House, continue to show skepticism about the objectives, methods and management of the widening war in Central America. Reagan's statement that the "small, violent right wing" in El Salvador is "not part of the government" is demonstrably untrue. Even Richard M. Nixon, who supports administration goals in Central America, refers to the CIA brainstorm of mining Nicaraguan harbors as "Mickey Mouse."

In the high councils of the administration, no issue has been more intensely debated, save possibly the gnawing concern about rising interest rates. There are no doves on Central America in the administration, but there are differing views on the touchy issues of the open "secret war" in Nicaragua and death squads in El Salvador.

Much of the internal debate centers on the role and personality of William J. Casey, the controversial CIA director who remains an object of suspicion among the relatively moderate voices in the administration.

Maneuverings in the White House on Central America have opened useful windows to Reagan's thinking and the workings of his administration. They challenge fashionable ideas about the Reagan presidency, including some put forward by this reporter.

Most of all, the president's policy tells us that the conservative slogan, "Let Reagan Be Reagan," is irrelevant. The truth is that there is no way to stop Reagan from being Reagan, even if one wanted to do so.

On the same day that Reagan spoke last week, Nixon gave a masterful luncheon speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors in which he painted a sophisticated picture of the global challenge. He said some countries need revolutions, and added, in a memorable observation, "The communists at least talk about the problems, and for too long, we have just talked about the communists."

Reagan's speech contained 23 references to "communists" or "communism," all hostile. To Reagan, who once seemed frozen with Nixon in the time frame of the 1950s, communism and the world's problems are synonymous. Although Reagan's proposals, embodied in the Kissinger commission's recommendations, contain more economic than military aid, the president sees menace in issues addressed by the economic aid only when they have been exploited by communists.

Reagan is often accused of being detached from administration decisions. I have referred to his presidency as "delegated" and "disengaged." But Reagan, far more than many presidents, has determined his administration's hemispheric agenda. "Will we stop the spread of communism in this hemisphere or not?" he asked. Reagan intends to stop it, regardless of the polls.

By all accounts from inside the administration, the decision to move ahead in Central America is Reagan's. He accepts the counsel of Casey, who has proved an effective in-house advocate, that Nicaragua is "a double Cuba." What Reagan has learned from his public-opinion surveys is not his policy but the way to make it more palatable. He therefore ignores the Salvadoran death squads, which most Americans abhor, and ducks the issue of the Nicaraguan covert war, which makes many Americans uneasy.

What Reagan will stress in the months ahead is his fundamental belief that Central America is communism's passageway to Mexico and ultimately the United States. He strikes a sensitive nerve when he links this vision to a flood of prospective refugees and illegal immigration.

"Reagan is beginning to gain ground on the proposition that Central America is different from Vietnam and Lebanon," said an adviser who would prefer to see him talk about economic recovery. "He has a long way to go, but he's made real progress with the argument. The proximity of Central America helps. So does the American distaste for Fidel Castro and the concern about another Cuba."

One had the feeling, listening to Nixon and Reagan on the same topics, that the former president knows considerably more about communists and the reasons for revolution. But Reagan's convictions have a more persuasive resonance with voters than does any sophisticated analysis. My guess is that those convictions will carry the day.